



**Submission to the next  
National Strategy for Women and Girls**

September 2024

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## Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation on the next National Strategy for Women and Girls, published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation, working in partnership with our members nationwide to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age Care settings – both centres and childminders homes. We advocate for an effective and inclusive Early Years and School Age Care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services.

Early Childhood Ireland has considerable experience in Early Years and School Age Care research, pedagogy, quality, learning, and policy influencing and development, which underpins our work in putting children at the centre of everything we do.

## Purpose of this submission

This submission will focus on Early Years and School Age Care, and gender equality.

It will show how the limited amount of free and/or affordable Early Years and School Age Care creates a difficulty for women to go back into the workforce after having children. This creates a barrier to employment, especially for households with lower incomes. It also excludes children from lower income families from participation in Early Years and School Age Care in comparison to their peers from higher income families.

The Early Years and School Age Care workforce in Ireland is predominantly female and on low pay. Our submission will make recommendations on making our workforce more sustainable by giving greater recognition to the level of training and value of the work of our Early Years and School Age Care educators.

Overall, our recommendations to improve our Early Years and School Age Care system, which include the implementation of a five-year plan with a new investment target, would make great strides in improving access to, and participation in, high-quality Early Years and School Age Care for all children, families and educators.

Our recommendations would improve the Early Years and School Age Care system for the women who avail of Early Years and School Age Care, for the women who work in settings and for the children who benefit from high-quality provision.

## The importance of Early Years and School Age Care

Early childhood is a critical period of growth and development. During a child's early years, they acquire social, emotional, language and cognitive skills that are the building blocks for their future.

Early Years education is often cited as a powerful intervention that lays the foundation for life-long learning and child well-being. It can also reduce educational inequalities.

"Evidence shows that children, especially those who are disadvantaged, who attend early childhood education and care are more likely to succeed, first at school then as adults in the labour market." (OECD/European Commission , 2023)

In Ireland, School Age Care is developing in terms of regulation, pedagogy, qualifications and workforce recognition.

## Government investment

Governments in wealthy countries are prioritising Early Years and School Age Care in their budgets. "In Ireland, public investment in early childhood education relative to GDP has increased by 37% between 2015 and 2021. Across the OECD, it has increased on average by 9% over this period." (OECD, 2024).

It must be noted, however, that this significant increase in investment came from a very low base. Despite the substantial investment in Early Years and School Age Care over the last few years, Ireland still lags behind other OECD countries for spending on Early Years education. The latest OECD figures in *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators* (OECD, 2024) show that Ireland spends 0.1% of GDP on Early Years education, compared to the OECD average of 0.9%.

## Early Years and School Age Care and gender equality

Women and girls represent half of the world's population and should enjoy the same opportunities as men and boys in our society.

"Gender equality is the concept that women and men should enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society. It envisions a society where all individuals, regardless of their gender, can live in safety and dignity and have the ability to realise their full potential, both contributing to and benefiting from economic, social, cultural and political development." (gov.ie, 2021)

For reasons outlined below, we are seeing that our Early Years and School Age Care system is not developed enough to ensure gender equality in Ireland.

## 1. The “childcare gap”

Ireland has a “childcare gap” of five years, one of the longest in the OECD. This gap impacts on women returning to work after having a child and on children accessing Early Years and School Age Care.

Across EU countries, the “childcare gap” is described as the period between the end of paid maternity, parental or home care leave and the start of a **legal entitlement to a guaranteed place** in an Early Years setting, i.e. the amount of time a child is not covered either by maternity leave or a guaranteed place in an Early Years setting (European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Eurydice, 2023). In the OECD calculations of the “childcare gap”, it replaces the duration of legal entitlement with **the duration of free provision** (OECD, 2024).

In OECD countries with short “childcare gaps”, such as Portugal, children benefit from the **guaranteed provision** of Early Years and School Age Care for a minimum of five years, from the end of paid maternity, paternal or home care leave until the start of compulsory education. (OECD, 2024)

Countries with longer “childcare gaps”, such as Ireland, have little or no government assistance in the provision of Early Years and School Age Care, leaving parents with “the choice of either private care, if financially feasible, or informal care where available. Those lacking access to these alternatives may face the difficult decision of leaving their jobs. Women are disproportionately affected by this scenario and are more likely to either exit the workforce or reduce their working hours upon becoming parents” (OECD, 2024).

Ireland does not guarantee a place or provide a legal entitlement to Early Years and School Age Care. Free provision is available in the form of the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) but the programme has its limitations, explained below.

### State provision of Early Years and School Age Care in Ireland

Some countries provide a legal entitlement to Early Years and School Age Care while others make Early Years and School Age Care compulsory. In Ireland, neither approach is taken.

Government assistance for parents with children in the Early Years and School Age Care system in Ireland is offered in the form of:

- i. Paid and unpaid forms of family leave.
- ii. fee subsidies through the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and

- iii. a universal free Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) of 15 weekly hours for children from the age of two years and eight months up to the age of five years and six months, for 38 weeks per year, for up to two years before starting primary school.
- iv. In return for Core Funding from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Early Years and School Age Care providers agree to freeze fees for parents at 2021 levels.

While these programmes are helpful, they are not without their problems, and they are not effective in shortening the “childcare gap”.

- i. access and capacity issues are a feature of Early Years and School Age Care system in Ireland. The latest [Pobal figures](#) show that in 2022 there were over 33,000 children on a waiting list with an Early Years setting in Ireland.
- ii. the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) does not provide additional Early Years and School Age Care capacity.
- iii. Furthermore, the free Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) offers a limited number of 15 hours per week, and only at a maximum number of three hours per day, for 38 weeks per year. It is also limited to children between the ages of 2 years and 8 months and 5 years and 6 months.

#### Recommendations:

1. **A public good:** Early Years and School Age Care is a public good and must be elevated to the same status as primary education.
2. **A sustained and sustainable workforce:** As a first step towards a publicly funded model, and to elevate the status of Early Years and School Age Care to that of primary education, a date should be set by government for bringing Early Years and School Age Care graduates within the public sector pay and conditions, in line with teachers.
3. **ECCE review:** Publish the report of the independent review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme that was [commissioned](#) by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in 2022.
4. **Family leave:** Guarantee 66% of a parent/guardian’s income during the first year of a child’s life to enable them to stay at home during this crucial period.

## 2. Affordability of Early Years and School Age Care in Ireland

Affordability is a significant factor in ensuring that the highest number of children have access to Early Years and School Age Care. It is also a factor in enabling parents to return to work and maintain an income after taking maternity/parental leave.

The cost of Early Years and School Age Care for parents in Ireland is one of the highest in the OECD (OECD, 2020) and in the European Union (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister, et al., 2019).

Research published by the Economic and Social Research Institute and Pobal, has found that mothers who face high childcare costs work fewer hours. The report found that the cost of childcare “posed a significant barrier to employment for women, especially lone parents” and that policies to address Early Years and School Age Care costs are “important from a policy perspective, as exclusion from the labour market due to childcare costs is associated with poverty risks and household joblessness” (Russell, et al., 2018)

Apart from the limited Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) and in exceptional cases, the NCS sponsorship arrangement<sup>1</sup>, the State does not provide free Early Years and School Age Care. The Irish government has tried to make Early Years and School Age Care more affordable for parents with the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and a fee freeze for parents who attend settings that participate in Core Funding. The NCS is a subsidy paid to Early Years and School Age Care settings on behalf of parents for each hour that the child attends a registered setting. The fee management element of Core Funding, where Early Years and School Age Care have frozen fees at 2021 levels, has also reduced fees for parents.

### Children from low-income families are at a disadvantage

The [OECD graph](#) below shows that 54% of children from birth to 2 years of age from high income families in Ireland (3<sup>rd</sup> tertile, highest) are enrolled in a formal<sup>2</sup> Early Years and School Age Care setting, while only 7% of children of the same age from lower income families (1<sup>st</sup> tertile, lowest) are enrolled in a formal setting (OECD, 2024). For comparison, across the OECD countries with available data, 32% of children from birth to 2 years of age, from lower income households, attend Early Years and School Age Care.

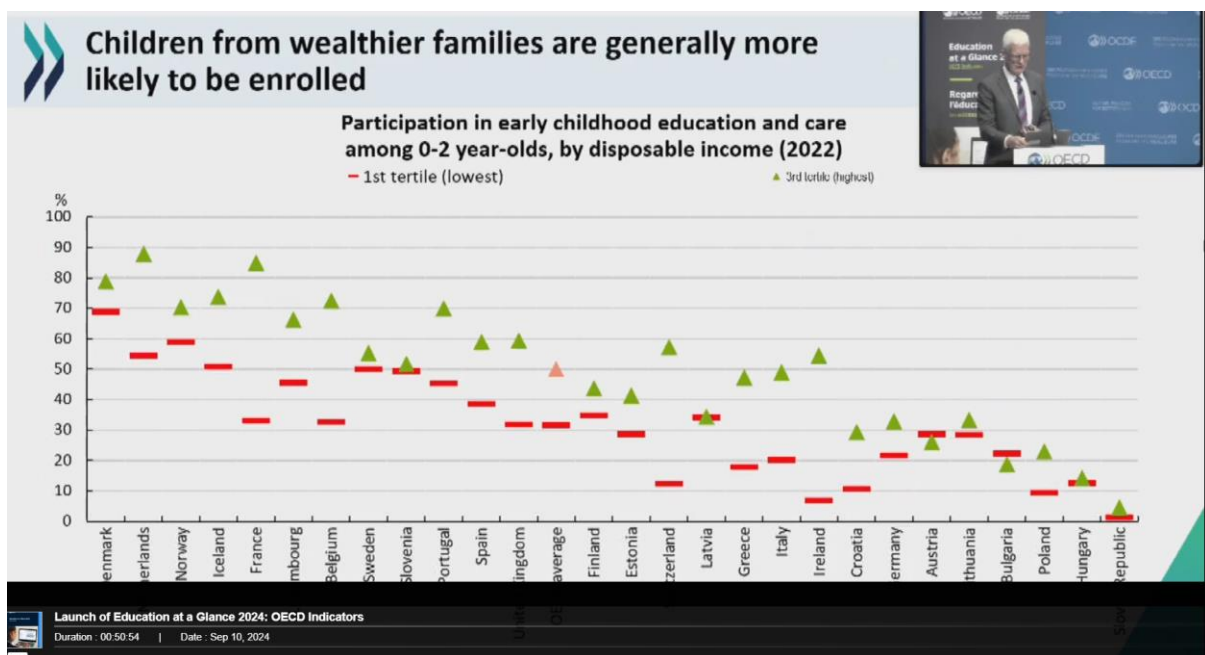
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<sup>1</sup> The NCS Sponsorship arrangement allows designated bodies to refer children to the Scheme where childcare is needed on child welfare, protection, family support or other specified grounds. Where a referral is made by a Sponsor body, the family will automatically qualify for a subsidy without having to satisfy the Scheme's eligibility, income or enhanced hours requirements. The Scheme will pay the full cost of the childcare for families referred to the Scheme by a Sponsor Body.

<sup>2</sup> Registered Early Years and School Age Care settings.

Within the OECD, Ireland’s participation rates for children from low-income families under the age of 2-years (7%) is the second lowest, ahead only of the Slovak Republic at 1% participation.

“Disparities in the use of childcare between low- and high-income families present a significant challenge in many countries, reflecting systemic inequities in access and differences in the propensity to use [Early Years and School Age Care]. This enrolment gap underlines how socio-economic status and use of childcare intersect, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies to address barriers faced by disadvantaged households” (OECD, 2024)



In May 2024, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth began the rollout of [Equal Start](#), a funding model with universal and targeted measures to support access and participation in Early Years and School Age Care for children and families who experience disadvantage in Ireland. In its first month, 621 settings accepted the Equal Start priority designation. An estimated 35,000 children will benefit from the programme.

#### Recommendations:

1. **A five-year plan with a new investment target:** Publish a five-year plan with a new investment target to ensure that the targets of the overarching Early Years and School Age Care policies (First 5, Nurturing Skills, Partnership for the Public Good) will be achieved by 2030, this includes Equal Start which specifically targets families experiencing disadvantage.
2. **Full implementation of [Equal Start](#),** the government's funding model with measures to support Early Years and School Age Care for children and families who experience disadvantage.

### 3. The Early Years and School Age Care workforce and gender

The Early Years and School Age Care workforce is predominantly female and on low pay.

#### 97% female workforce

According to the latest available [Pobal figures](#) (2022/23), 97% of all managers and Early Years and School Age Care educators who work in the sector are female.

#### Low pay

The current Employment Regulation Order (ERO) for the Early Years and School Age Care sector is an agreed minimum hourly rate for Early Years and School Age Care staff. It is €0.95 above the National Minimum Wage (€12.70) and €1.10 below the Living Wage<sup>3</sup> which is currently €14.75. (Table 1).

Table 1: The current ERO rate in comparison to the National Minimum Wage and Living Wage

	<b>Current ERO Rate</b>	<b>Difference between the ERO rate and the National Minimum Wage for people aged 20 and above @€12.70 (Jan 2024)</b>	<b>Difference between the ERO rate and the Living Wage of €14.75 (a National Living Wage to be introduced in 2026)</b>
Early Years Educators SAC practitioners	€13.65 per hour	+€0.95	-€1.10

<sup>3</sup> The Living Wage is calculated by the [Living Wage Technical Group](#). A National Living Wage will be introduced in Ireland in 2026

Lead Educators SAC coordinators	€14.70	+€2	-€0.05
Graduate Lead Educators (Room Leaders) Graduate SAC Coordinators	€16.28	+€3.58	+€1.53
Deputy/Assistant Manager	€16.49	+€3.79	+€1.74
Centre Manager	€17.33	+€4.63	+€2.58
Graduate Centre Manager	€18.11	+€5.41	+€3.36

The rate of pay does not reflect the value of the work or the level of training and education that educators have obtained in Early Years and School Age Care.

Quality Early Years and School Age Care professionals are key to providing high quality Early Years and School Age Care.

Working in Early Years and School Age Care settings requires high-level knowledge and core skills such as the ability to relate well with children, understanding child development and being adept at delivering education and care that meets the individual needs of a child.

97% of staff working directly with children in Early Years and School Age Care had a qualification at NFQ Level 5 or higher. The proportion of staff with a qualification at NFQ Level 6 or higher was 70%. Of the staff with higher levels qualifications, 33.2% had a level 7 or above.<sup>4</sup>

#### Low pay and gender

The relatively low level of pay for this predominantly female and qualified workforce reflects the existence of a gender stereotype that Early Years and School Age Care is care work, which is best suited to, and provided by, women. In fact, in high-quality Early Years and School Age Care settings, care and education are not separated and are provided

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<sup>4</sup> Pobal Early Years Sector Profile 2020/21

seamlessly. Though low paid, Early Years educators and School Age Care practitioners are skilled professionals, many with degree level qualifications and/or decades of experience.

Furthermore, many women in Early Years and School Age Care settings have limited employment benefits. Pobal [data](#) shows that just 11% of Early Years and School Age Care educators are offered maternity pay top-ups and 17% are offered employer pension contributions.

### [Impact of low pay on the Early Years and School Age Care sector](#)

A recent survey highlighted the impact that low pay is having on the female workforce, and on the families and children who participate in Early Years and School Age Care.

Staff shortages: The trade union, SIPTU, recently published the results of a survey of educators and managers in Early Years services which indicated that “low rates of pay for workers is the main driving force behind a worsening staffing crisis.” As a result, “staff recruitment and retention is having a major impact on the ability of services to meet the needs of parents and children. Staff shortages are increasing the workload on existing staff, leading to increased stress and burnout. Recruitment challenges are also crippling the sector, leaving many services unable to meet the increased demands in communities across the country.”

SIPTU’s findings are backed up by a recent policy brief<sup>5</sup> published by the European Commission which showed that in the year leading up to mid-2023, 56% of Early Years and School Age Care services in Ireland experienced recruitment challenges.

Financial stress: SIPTU’s survey shed light on the financial stress that Early Years and School Age Care educators are under with 95% of those surveyed revealing that they were only able “to make ends meet” with “difficulty” or “great difficulty”. Many feared unexpected expenses, such as replacing a washing machine.

### [Gender imbalance amongst Early Years and School Age Care educators](#)

The role of the Early Years and School Age Care setting is to be inclusive of all children.

The [2016 Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education](#) were developed to support, guide and empower the Early Years and School Age Care sector to deliver diversity, equality and inclusion focus to practice and training.

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<sup>5</sup> [European Commission Policy Brief](#) – Staff shortages in early childhood education and care (ECEC), November 2023

“This means recognising gender, ability, culture, class ethnicity, language, religion, sexuality and family structure as integral to society.”

Aistear and Síolta “place children at the centre of their own learning and development and view them as citizens with rights and responsibilities, free from any form of discrimination.” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2013)

When 98% of the Early Years and School Age Care sector workforce is female, there is a distinct lack of visibility of male educators in the system. This may reinforce the gender stereotype that women are caregivers, and men, less so. Unfortunately, children in Early Years and School Age Care settings do not experience male support for learning and development. Having more men in settings would provide children with an accurate reflection of the gender mix of the world around them and would help tackle gender stereotypes.

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the universal measures (Strand 1) of the recently announced [Equal Start](#) model which will support all Early Years and School Age Care settings to be more inclusive through reviewing and updating the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines, the Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years (LINC) training and by reviewing the support for the Inclusion Coordinator role.

We expect the above reviews to include gender equality in Early Years and School Age Care settings.

**Recommendations:**

- 1. A sustained and sustainable workforce:** As a first step towards a publicly funded model, and to elevate the status of Early Years and School Age Care to that of primary education, a date should be set by government for bringing Early Years and School Age Care graduates within public sector pay and conditions, in line with teachers.
- 2. Male workforce:** The government should make efforts to encourage more male Early Years and School Age Care educators by:
  - i. Setting a date for bringing Early Years and School Age Care graduates within public sector pay and conditions, in line with teachers.
  - ii. Setting a recruitment target for male educators
  - iii. Promoting careers in Early Years and School Age Care to men.

## 4. Capacity

There is a large body of evidence of the benefits of Early Years and School Age Care for children and for enabling women's participation in the workforce, but this is of no use if families are unable to access Early Years and School Age Care when they need it.

There are currently over [33,300 children](#) under the age of three on a waiting list for an Early Years and School Age Care setting. There is simply not enough capacity for children in their very early years (age 1-3 years), which is also the time that many parents return to work after maternity leave. The table below shows the capacity per 100 children by age group

**Table 2: Number of places per 100 children by age group.**

Age	Number of children ( <a href="#">Source</a> )	Capacity ( <a href="#">Source</a> )	Places per 100 children
Up to 1 year	55,716	2,443	4
1+ to 2 years	58,637	12,256	21
2+ to 3 years	57,598	23,610	41

### Recommendations:

- 1. Capacity planning:** Guided by the data of local Early Years and School Age Care needs assessments, initiate a system of national and local two-year and five-year planning cycles, to ensure there are enough Early Years and School Age Care places, in settings and Childminders' homes, for children in their own communities.
- 2. Childminding and capacity planning:** Implement in full the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028.

## Early Childhood Ireland Recommendations

Early Childhood Ireland's recommendations below will advance gender equality by improving access and affordability of our Early Years and School Age Care system for families, and by improving the pay and conditions of its predominantly female workforce. We recommend the following:

## Recommendations:

1. **A public good:** Early Years and School Age Care is a public good and must be elevated to the same status as primary education.
2. **A sustained and sustainable workforce:** As a first step towards a publicly funded model, and to elevate the status of Early Years and School Age Care to that of primary education, a date should be set by government for bringing Early Years and School Age Care graduates within the public sector pay and conditions, in line with teachers.
3. **ECCE review:** Publish the report of the independent review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme that was [commissioned](#) by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in 2022.
4. **A five-year plan with a new investment target:** Publish a five-year plan with a new investment target to ensure that the targets of the overarching Early Years and School Age Care policies (First 5, Nurturing Skills, Partnership for the Public Good) will be achieved by 2030, this includes Equal Start which specifically targets families experiencing disadvantage.
5. **Capacity planning:** Guided by the data of local Early Years and School Age Care needs assessments, initiate a system of national and local two-year and five-year planning cycles, to ensure there are enough Early Years and School Age Care places, in settings and Childminders' homes, for children in their own communities.
  - a. **Childminding and capacity planning:** Implement in full the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028.
6. **Full implementation of [Equal Start](#),** the government's funding model with measures to support Early Years and School Age Care for children and families who experience disadvantage.
7. **Family leave:** Guarantee 66% of a parent/guardian's income during the first year of a child's life to enable them to stay at home during this crucial period.
8. **Male workforce:** The government should make efforts to encourage more male Early Years and School Age Care educators by:
  - i. Setting a date for bringing Early Years and School Age Care graduates within public sector pay and conditions, in line with teachers.
  - ii. Setting a recruitment target for male educators
  - iii. Promoting careers in Early Years and School Age Care to men.

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